



holding childhood in meghalaya



Lessons in Care,
Learning, and Joy





HOLDING CHILDHOOD IN MEGHALAYA



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This report documents field insights from a series of visits across early childhood spaces in Meghalaya, with a focus on Anganwadi centres, community libraries, CMYCs (Children and Youth Centres), and households. The work is part of a broader inquiry into how care, learning, and community participation unfold across formal and informal systems, often quietly, and often in conditions of constraint. The field visits offered not only data points, but textures, of damp walls and turmeric-stained hands, of betel-nut laughter and attentive silences, of play rules made up on the spot and knowledge passed down without instruction.

Section I brings together these textures into a thematic essay, surfacing patterns in how care is held, distributed, and made visible (or not) within these spaces. It acts as a foundation for the persona sketches that follow in Section II.

Tracing the Terrain of Care: Observations from the Field

In the hill villages of Meghalaya, where the wind changes course without warning and classrooms are made of plywood and prayer, the everyday work of raising children unfolds with a quiet intensity. Our time across Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, Diengsong, and other sites was not a neat story of interventions or innovations. It was a slow, layered noticing, of silence, of care, of what holds a space together when no one is watching.

We did not begin with frameworks. We began by listening. By sitting on damp mats in Anganwadis. By watching a young girl place her brother in her lap so she could focus on a turmeric imprint activity. By smelling the smoke from a hearth where women slapped clay into form, old, cracked hands still sure in their rhythm.

The Work That Doesn't Announce Itself

Care in these settings is not declared. It is lived. The Anganwadi worker in Khlietryich didn't ask for praise when she hand-painted the charts on the walls. The helper who stood outside didn't speak, but washed turmeric off children's hands between activities. A Class 11 girl who dreams of becoming both a footballer and a baker still finds time to knead dough with care and joy. Across sites, we saw that labour is not always named, but it carries weight nonetheless. This invisible labour is often gendered, generational, and quiet. And yet it is this very work that keeps the rhythm of the day going. It is not just a story of systems failing. It is a story of people stepping up, again and again.

Learning in the Gaps

In the absence of consistent infrastructure, English teachers who never arrive, YouTube replacing training modules, patchy electricity, children and caregivers alike make do with creativity. Games emerge organically: three boys invent a tag-like game with no words, only gestures. A librarian lets children choose their own books. An AWW improvises with turmeric, handprints, and laughter instead of prescribed worksheets.

We saw how play is not separate from pedagogy. It is pedagogy. Joy is not a reward after learning, it is learning. In these spaces, play, song, and gesture carry more weight than chalk and talk.

And yet, the gaps persist. Helpers who are not allowed to participate. App systems that demand face uploads over meaningful data. The sense that some people in the room are present, but not included.

Participation, then, is not flat. It is layered. Some sit at the front and lead. Others hover at the edges. Some enter through stories. Others through food. To build truly inclusive learning spaces, we must ask not only “who is here?” but also “how are they allowed to be here?”

Silence, as Design

Across every site, one thing stood out: silence. Not the silence of boredom or fear. But the kind of silence that holds attention. In Khlietryich, children waited quietly, no prodding, no restlessness. In Diengsong, kids removed their shoes and made space for each other without being told. A young child helped another shut the bathroom door gently.

Silence, we learned, is not absence. It is attention. In a world obsessed with outcomes and volume, this was a design lesson we did not expect to learn, that slowness, stillness, and listening are not failures. They are features.

Technology That Listens, Not Just Logs

Technology is present, but rarely central. An AWW watches teaching videos on YouTube. A librarian finds songs online. The Poshan Tracker demands more than it gives. No child we saw was using a screen. And perhaps that was the gift, spaces where the screen does not replace the story.

This is not a rejection of tech. But it is a reminder: technology must follow the rhythm of the people, not the other way around. Design tools that listen, adapt, and hold complexity, not just ones that extract data

Towards a Pedagogy of Care

What does all this mean for how we imagine childhood spaces?

It means designing with attention, not urgency.

It means treating care as infrastructure, not charity.

It means noticing the unspoken, the unsaid, the gestures that carry more than words ever could.

A grandmother who came to the CMYC said she just wanted to sit and watch. Another caregiver sang lullabies she had never been taught, she had learned them from her daughter. A father made cake and football jokes, but also spoke solely of his own childhood, where there was no music, no time for joy.

These are not stories for policy alone. They are blueprints for a different way of seeing..

The Final Lesson: Joy is Data

We left Meghalaya with soil on our clothes, betel leaf stains on our fingers, and stories still unfolding. And if there is one thing these spaces taught us, it is this: if a space is not joyful, it is not working. If children do not laugh, if caregivers do not smile, if no one sings, something is missing. Let joy be our indicator. Let care be our curriculum. And let silence, that most underrated design tool, guide us home.

From Patterns to People: Introducing the Persona Gallery

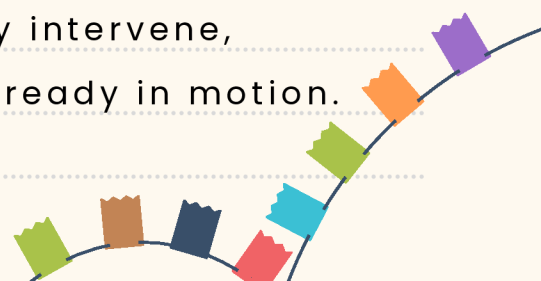
The previous section offered a thematic synthesis, surfacing design cues, behavioural insights, and patterns of care observed across the field. To ground these findings in lived experience, we now turn to a series of narrative sketches. Each persona draws from direct observation, conversation, and ethnographic detail gathered during our field visits across Meghalaya.

These are not fictional composites. Each one reflects a real individual, an Anganwadi worker, a parent, a librarian, a young learner, navigating daily realities with quiet skill, resilience, and intention. Through these sketches, we aim to preserve the texture of care, the weight of decisions, and the emotional labour that shapes early childhood ecosystems in often unseen ways.

This section serves both as a mirror and a map:

A mirror, reflecting the nuance and diversity of caregiving, learning, and community work in practice.

A map, pointing to where design might gently intervene, accompany, or reimagine support systems already in motion.

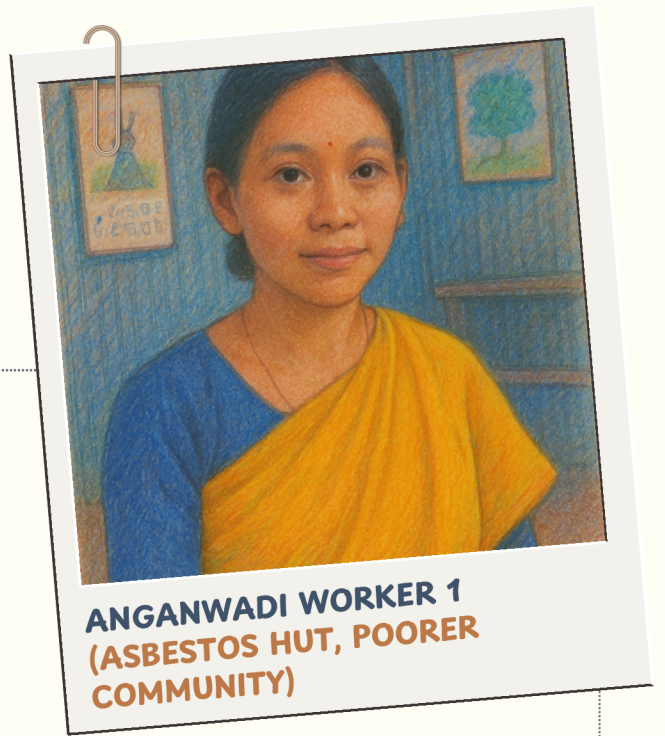


PERSONAS

AGE: 30
Married,
No Children

SPACE

A small, asbestos-roofed, leaking hut. Very basic — mats, a few tables, a couple of posters she paid for herself, two children's books .



WORK

Runs activities like rhymes, turmeric handprints, and storytelling. Knows each child's backpack, name, and quirks. She's able to manage a bunch of kids with such ease.

TEACHING STYLE

Meek and shy with visitors, but very confident with her children — her face lights up when she's among them.

METHODS

Does not use YouTube. Receives monthly themes and interprets them herself.

CHALLENGES

Resource scarcity; must navigate patchy support with innovative ways.

SPIRIT

Gentle, consistent presence. Treats her role like a quiet lifeline for the children.



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

Mid-30's
Experienced,
Enthusiastic

SPACE

A sturdier tin-roofed but concrete-built anganwadi, well-stocked with donated toys, books, and workbooks .



ANGANWADI WORKER 2
(PAKKA CONCRETE CENTRE)

WORK

Conducts many activities — art, craft, hygiene talks, storytelling. Offers a safe, trusted space even for teenagers (14–18 years old) who come for supplemental food and conversation.

TEACHING STYLE

Very hands-on. Uses YouTube to find art-and-craft ideas and storytime activities.

CHALLENGES

Dislikes the heavy administrative load — documentation, village surveys, attendance checking.

SPIRIT

Joyful, grateful for the chance to work with children and shape young lives.

*P*ERSONAS

PROFILE:

Woman, around 49 years old, Principal for decades.



PRINCIPAL

WORK

Runs multi-grade classes out of a temporary community hall.

APPROACH

Authoritative, distant, seen with respect rather than warmth by children.

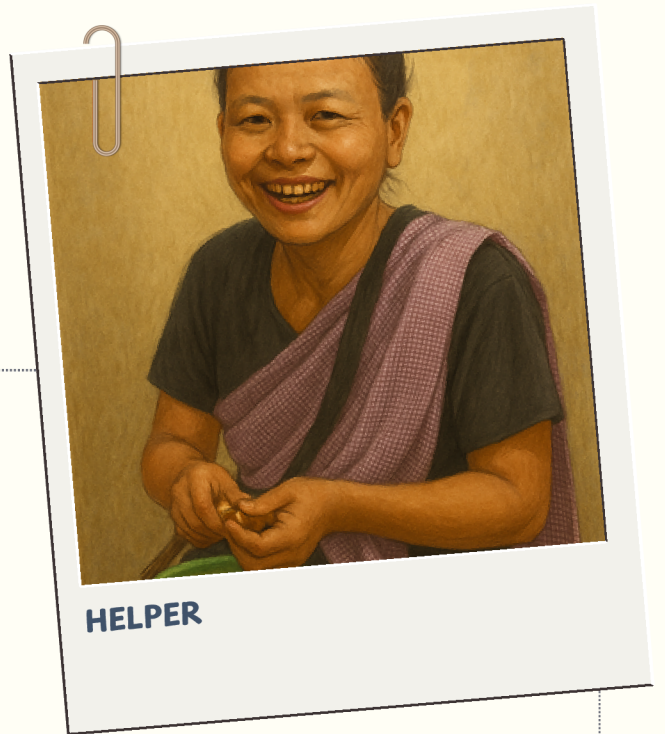
SPIRIT

Steady guardian of education amidst infrastructural challenges.

*P*ERSONAS

PROFILE:

Mid-30s to 40s,
supportive,
quietly cheerful.



WORK

Helps with washing
children's hands, meal
preparation, basic
cleaning.

APPROACH

Authoritative, distant,
seen with respect rather
than warmth by
children.

SPIRIT

A steady presence enabling the anganwadi
worker to focus on the children.



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

Mostly young, often juggling multiple children, poor nutrition, and the demands of survival.



MOTHER

LIFE

Work as informal daily-wage earners. Infants often cling to them during work, seen tied to their mothers' backs or tagging along.

CARE

Older children often drop off their younger siblings at anganwadi or school.

CHALLENGES

Teenage pregnancies, alcoholism, malnutrition.

SPIRIT

Despite so much burden, find ways to keep children connected to food and learning.



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

Very few left, most pass away by late 50s or early 60s.



GRANDMOTHER

ROLE

Seen as communal grandmothers. A living bridge between generations.

CARE

Older children often drop off their younger siblings at anganwadi or school.

VOICES

Deep concern about teenage pregnancies, addiction among young mothers, the erosion of traditional support systems .

SPIRIT

Hold the emotional memory and the concern for children's futures, even with limited resources.



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

Shy woman who has blossomed into an extroverted community presence.



LIBRARIAN

SPACE

A vibrant, colourful room with paintings, emoji cards, and interactive games.

WORK

Reads children's chosen stories, holds art-and-craft sessions, runs group games. Creates spaces where little ones sit snugly on older siblings' laps.

METHODS

Occasionally uses YouTube for fun storytelling ideas but relies mainly on creativity and the children's inputs.

SPIRIT

Builds a world where reading, emotions, and play sit side-by-side — all woven together in a safe, joyous atmosphere.



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

20,
Spirited,
A beacon of joy.



ULTIMATE FRISBEE TEACHER

ROLE

Runs frisbee training for girls and boys, adapts drills from YouTube.

BELIEFS

Sees rain as a celebration, play as freedom. Advocates for girls' right to stay back and play, often negotiating with parents.

VOICES

Wants her girls to one day represent Meghalaya at national Ultimate Frisbee tournaments .

SPIRIT

Infectious energy, a living example that sport can be an engine for dignity, resilience, and community spirit. Has convinced many parents to send kids (girls especially) to ultimate, initial hesitance but now commonplace.



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

40's,
Traditional, Stern,
Values discipline.



OLD FATHER

BELIEFS

Fathers must be less emotionally available to preserve authority. Focused on sons completing education first (masters level) before talking of marriage.

PRESENCE

Absent for long stretches due to work. Sees 'being stern' as a way of showing care



PERSONAS

PROFILE:

Much softer, involved, part of community programmes.



YOUNG FATHER
(ACTIVE CAREGIVER)

BELIEFS

Plays, talks, and spends time actively with children. Admits that phone usage creeps in sometimes for convenience.

PRESENCE

Very hands-on, but acknowledges his role is unusual compared to community norms.